DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 354 781 FL 021 008

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TITLE University-Level Learners of Spanish in Ireland: A Profile Based on Data from the TCD Modern Languages Research Project. CLCS Occasional Paper No. 35.
INSTITUTION Trinity Coll., Dublin (Ireland). Centre for Language and Communication Studies.
REPORT NO ISSN-0332-3889
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Freshmen; College Students; Educational Background; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Introductory Courses; Language Role; School Surveys; Second Language Learning; *Second Languages; *Spanish; *Student Characteristics
IDENTIFIERS *Ireland

ABSTRACT

Drawing on data collected for a larger study of second language learner characteristics at the Trinity College Dublin (Ireland), a profile of freshmen taking introductory Spanish in 1990-91 is reported. Subjects were 21 students, 20 female and 1 male. Most were of traditional college age, and a few were in their 30s. Almost half had previous Spanish language instruction. Most were also studying another language. Students had a relatively broad-based school education, often concentrating on and doing well in languages and language-related subject areas. The students perceived Spanish as suiting a range of interests, utilitarian, cultural, and other. Most had begun language study after age 10 and in formal instruction, and none had found it difficult. Elements of language learning found congenial included particular kinds of learning materials and classroom activities, and contributions of native speakers and language teachers. Age at which the students had begun formal language instruction (under 12 and over 12 years) was not related to students' later success, but meaningful interaction did appear related to success. Attitudes toward grammar instruction and toward interactions with native speakers also influenced success. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

Centre for Language and Communication Studies

University-level learners of Spanish in Ireland

A profile based on data from the TCD Modern Languages Research Project

David Singleton and Emer Singleton

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CLCS Occasional Paper No.35

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ISSN 0332 3889

Autumn 1992

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University-level learners of Spanish in Ireland: a profile based on data from the TCD Modern Languages Research Project

by

David Singleton and Emer Singleton

1 Introduction

This paper draws on data from the Trinity College Dublin (TCD) Modern Languages Research Project (see Singleton 1990) in order to sketch a profile of a sample of the 1990-91 intake of students of Spanish at TCD. The research project in question was inaugurated on a pilot basis in 1988 and has been fully operational since October 1990. It was initiated and continues to be co-ordinated from the TCD Centre for Language and Communication Studies, but it also has the active co-operation of the TCD Departments of French, Germanic Studies, Italian and Spanish.

The project is organized on two levels. At Level 1, data about general education, language learning experience and language use are sought *via* a questionnaire from all first-year undergraduate students of French, German, Italian and Spanish, and respondents' subsequent progress in the language(s) they are studying is monitored by reference to their university language examination results. At Level 2, subsamples of students of French and German are observed more closely, L2 data being elicited from them at regular intervals by means of instruments such as reduced-redundancy procedures, translation tasks, story-retelling tasks and word-association tests. The data collected under the auspices of the project are being computerized using a sophisticated relational database, namely ORACLE (Version 6), so that correlations and comparisons are possible in respect of any and all of the variables identified.

The present discussion is based on Level 1 data for students of Spanish who entered university in October 1990 and who took end-of-year university examinations in Spanish in May 1991. Since co-operation in the data-gathering process was voluntary on the part of

the students, we were unable to ensure anything like 100% participation. However, the students' response rate did exceed 50%, which allows us to infer, we think, that the picture which emerges from our data is reasonably representative.

The paper begins with a brief general description of the composition of the sample, goes on to mention our subjects' general educational profile, homes in on their perceptions and experience of Spanish in particular, and finally takes a brief look at such perceptions and experience in the light of language learning success as measured by the first-year university Spanish language examination.

2 The sample

Our sample consists of 21 subjects, out of a total of 40 students who completed the first-year course in Spanish at TCD in 1990-91 (52.5%). Of these 21, 20 (95.2%) are female and 1 (4.8%) is male, this very marked predominance of females reflecting a strong tendency towards the feminization of university-level foreign language degree courses in Ireland generally.

As far as age is concerned, the vast majority of our 21 subjects — 18 (85.7%) — fall into the normal age-range for university entrance in Ireland, i.e. 17-20 years. The remaining 3 subjects (14.3%) are "mature students", all in their thirties.

10 of our subjects (47.6%) had taken Spanish at school prior to commencing their university course, whilst the remaining 11 (52.4%) had not previously learned Spanish and were embarking on their study of the language on an *ab initio* basis.

All of our subjects are taking the degree programme in Spanish in combination with a degree programme in another discipline. This is a necessity imposed by the TCD system, within which it is not possible to take any foreign language on a solo basis. The other disciplines in question are mostly other languages. Thus, 14 of our subjects (66.7%) are taking French, 1 (4.8%) is taking Irish, 1 (4.8%) is taking Latin and 1 (4.8%) is taking Russian. Of the remaining 4 subjects, 1 (4.8%) is taking Classical Civilization (which has optional linguistic components in Classical Latin and Classical Greek), and 3 (14.3%) are taking Sociology.

The above data suggest that the typical first-year student of Spanish at TCD is female, is aged between 17 and 20 years and is studying another language (probably French) in combination with Spanish.

3 General educational profile

Responses elicited on general educational background suggest a relatively broad-based experience. No one in our sample had taken public examinations in fewer than 8 school subjects, the average being 10.6. This latter figure breaks down to an average of 6.7 non-language subjects and 3.9 language subjects.

With regard to the non-language areas, every single student in our sample had sat public examinations in mathematics and history, 19 (90.5%) in geography, 18 (85.7%) in science, 15 (71.4%) in the area of business studies/commerce/economics, and 12 (57.1%) in art. Minorities of students had taken public examinations in home economics (6 — 28.6%) music (5 — 23.8%), and religion (3 — 14.3%). In many instances more than one examination had been taken in the same broad area. For example, several students had taken both a general science examination and an examination in a particular branch of science (e.g., biology).

As far as language-related areas are concerned, all of the students in our sample had taken public examinations in English, 20 students (95.2%) had taken such examinations in French, and 19 (90.5%) in Irish. 10 (47.6%) had sat public examinations in Spanish, and smaller numbers had sat examinations in German (4 — 19.0%), English Literature (3 — 14.3%), Latin (3 — 14.3%), Greek (1 — 4.8%) and Italian (1 — 4.8%). It is noteworthy that in all cases at least two living languages other than English had been taken at school. For students educated in Ireland, Irish would inevitably have been one of these, since Irish is part of the curricular core throughout the whole of primary and secondary education. However, the learning of a continental language is not a feature of every Irish school pupil's experience (see Ruane 1990), and indeed there is actually in some circles hostility to the presence of foreign languages on the curriculum (see, e.g., Williams 1991 — responded to in Singleton 1992). Nevertheless, our sample contains a fair sprinkling of examples of individuals (8 — 38.1%) who had taken two or more continental languages at school.

The students in our sample have, moreover, been somewhat more successful in languages and language-related areas than in other areas. Thus, for example, taking the group's examination results at school-leaving level all together, we find that the percentage of A and B honours grades which were obtained relative to all grades obtained in non-language examinations (14.3%) is markedly lower than the

percentage of A and B honours grades obtained in language and language-related examinations (25.0%).

In sum, then, students of Spanish at TCD seem to have had a reasonably broad-based school education. Unsurprisingly, they have often concentrated on and done particularly well in languages and language-related areas.

4 Perceptions and experience of Spanish

It is quite clear that our subjects see Spanish as a valuable asset to them for future career purposes. Amongst the reasons they give for taking Spanish at university one of the most frequently mentioned is enhancement of post-university employment prospects (18 mentions). Not far behind this reason come references to definite career plans involving Spanish (13 mentions). This looks like evidence of an "instrumental" orientation (Gardner & Lambert 1972) towards the language. However, other responses tend to qualify this impression somewhat. Evidence of an "integrative" dimension to our subjects' motivation (*ibid.*) is provided by 17 mentions of an interest in other cultures, 14 mentions of interest in the culture/history of Spanish in particular, 13 mentions of definite plans for travel/residence abroad, 11 mentions of positive experience of a country where Spanish is the normal medium of communication, and 10 mentions of an interest in literature. Other frequently given reasons seem to transcend the "instrumental" and "integrative" polarity — namely the European dimension (18 mentions) and the development of language skills (14 mentions).

A further cluster of reasons for opting for Spanish at university that is worth mentioning is centred on the learning/studying process itself (cf. Crookes & Schmidt 1991) — the fact that Spanish combines well with the other course of study chosen (8 mentions), previous positive experience of learning Spanish (7 mentions), and enjoyable previous experience of a related area of study (7 mentions). Given that so many of the sample have successfully studied and are continuing to study languages other than Spanish and that French, a language derived from the same source as Spanish, is so prominent amongst these other languages, it is perhaps not to be wondered at that links between Spanish and previous and current areas of study have had some role in motivating subject choice. Concerning the references to previous positive experience of learning Spanish itself, it should be recalled that only 10 students from our sample had learned Spanish

at school; the fact that 7 of those 10 saw fit to mention the quality of their earlier experience of learning the language as a ground for choosing to study Spanish at university is obviously a reassuring finding for those involved in the teaching of Spanish in Irish schools.

Interestingly, if one compares the reasons given by the students in our sample for choosing to follow a university course in Spanish with the reasons given by those 16 persons within the same sample who are studying French for opting to take a degree in that language, one finds a broad similarity in relation to the frequency with which the various reasons crop up. Thus, the most frequently mentioned reasons given for choosing French at university by the relevant subsample include "instrumental" motives (career plans and employment prospects), "integrative" motives (cultural, historical and literary interests as well as definite plans to travel/reside abroad), motives transcending the "instrumental"/"integrative" polarity (the European dimension and the desire to develop language skills of various kinds), and learning/study-related motives (positive previous experience of learning Spanish and positive previous experience of a related subject). What this general resemblance between frequency patterns of the two sets of reasons appears to imply is that the students in our sample see Spanish and French in a very similar light as major languages on the European scene offering career-enhancing possibilities, cultural and linguistic interests and opportunities for further enjoyable study.

Turning now to the experience of Spanish reported by those 10 subjects in our sample who had learned the language previously, we find that for all but one of these their first encounter with Spanish occurred after age 10. 2 subjects had begun learning Spanish at age 11, 1 at age 12, 2 at age 13, 3 at age 15 and 1 at age 16. These last two figures reflect the fact that in Irish schools Spanish is often taken as a second or third foreign language and is frequently begun rather late in the day. The remaining subject had spent her early years in Spain and had acquired Spanish and English as joint first languages.

Most (7) of the above 10 students had started Spanish at secondary level. This would be representative of the usual pattern in Ireland, where languages other than English and Irish are officially reserved for the second-level curriculum. However 2 of our subjects — those who had first encountered Spanish at age 11 — had begun to learn the language during their primary-level schooling, which, it should be noted, tends to extend to age 12 or even 13 in Ireland (as opposed to age 11 in, for example, Great Britain). What this reflects is the fact that

a minority of primary schools in Ireland — under pressure from Europe-conscious parents — have introduced extra-curricular, typically "after-hours", instruction in one or more continental languages. Finally, 1 subject, as has already been indicated, began acquiring Spanish in the home; her name suggests that she is the offspring of a Spanish-Irish marriage.

All but 1 of the 10 subjects who had learned Spanish previously reported formal instruction as the principal element in their learning of the language. The single subject who diverged from this pattern was our Spanish-English bilingual, who reported that the prime factor in her learning of Spanish had been her experience of Spanish in a Spanish-speaking milieu. Subsidiary elements mentioned included contact with the language through reading, radio and television and through letter-writing. All of the 10 reported having enjoyed learning Spanish and none reported having found learning the language particularly problematic; asked to rate the experience on a 5-point scale ranging from "very difficult" to "very easy", 5 ticked "average", 2 ticked "easy", and 2 ticked "very easy".

With regard to specific aspects of the learning process that they had enjoyed and not enjoyed, Table 1 presents the picture that

TABLE 1 **Aspects of the experience of learning Spanish reported as enjoyed and not enjoyed by the 10 subjects who had learned Spanish previously**

	No. of subjects referring to enjoyment of this element	No. of subjects referring to non-enjoyment of this element
oral work	9	1
literature	5	0
project work	5	0
roleplaying	5	2
tapes	5	1
language lab.	4	0
textbooks	4	1
written work	4	2
audio-visual materials	3	0
grammar	3	5

TABLE 2 **Aspects of the experience of learning Spanish reported as helpful and unhelpful by the 10 subjects who had learned Spanish previously**

	No. of subjects referring to helpfulness of this element	No. of subjects referring to unhelpfulness of this element
teacher's attitude	9	0
oral work	8	0
learning conditions	7	1
teacher's ability	7	1
authentic materials	6	0
native speaker availability	6	0
grammar	4	0
literature	4	0
tapes	4	0
drama	1	0
limited amount of grammar	1	3
Spanish-speaking milieu	1	0
lack of native speaker	0	1
poetry	0	1
textbooks	0	1
limited oral work	0	2
lack of authentic materials	0	2
lack of language lab.	0	4

emerges. Table 2 summarizes what the same 10 subjects had to say about elements they had and had not found helpful in the process of learning Spanish. Taking the two tables together, it appears that the subjects in question perceived a link in a number of instances between enjoyment and helpfulness. The views expressed on oral work, literature and tapes are cases in point. Other striking features of these data include the preoccupation with learning materials and specific classroom activities, the importance ascribed to the teacher and to native speaker contact, and the ambivalence exhibited towards the question of grammar (cf. Little & Singleton 1988).

Finally in this section a word about impressions of Spanish native speakers recorded by our 10 subjects with previous experience of Spanish. A 5-point rating scale ranging from "very unfavourable" to "very favourable" was used to elicit such impressions, but, in fact, the

"very unfavourable" and "unfavourable" categories were not ticked by any of our subjects. 4 subjects entered a verdict of "very favourable", 2 reported their impressions as "favourable", 3 reported "mixed" impressions, and 1 subject failed to respond.

Spanish, then, is perceived by our subjects as offering a range of interests — utilitarian, cultural and other. Of those students in our sample who had learned the language prior to university entry, most had started to learn it after age 10 in a formal instructional environment, all had enjoyed the learning experience, and none had found it especially difficult. Elements of the learning process which they had found congenial in one way or another include particular kinds of learning materials and classroom activities and the contribution of the teacher and of native speakers. Impressions of these latter are on balance positive.

5 Success (and failure) factors

One aspect of L2 learning experience that is often claimed to have an effect on learning success is the age at which learning starts. The balance of available evidence supports the general line taken by Krashen, Long & Scarcella (1979) and more recently by Long (1990); namely, that in situations of "naturalistic" exposure, whilst older beginners tend in some respects to outperform their juniors in the first 12 months or so of learning, in terms of long-term outcomes, generally speaking, the earlier exposure to the target language begins the better. As far as instructed L2 learning is concerned, the consistent finding of the relevant studies is that pupils who are given early formal exposure to an L2 and are then mixed in with pupils without such experience do not in the medium term maintain an advantage over pupils who begin to learn the language only at secondary level. The apparent discrepancy between such evidence and evidence from naturalistic studies can, however, be related to the blurring effect which must result from mixing beginners and non-beginners in the same classes and can, in any case, readily be accounted for in terms of gross differences in exposure time between naturalistic and instructed learners (see, e.g., Stern 1976; Singleton 1989; Singleton forthcoming).

For the purpose of this paper the first-year Spanish language examination results achieved by our subjects were organized and compared as follows. First we divided the results of the group who had begun learning Spanish at school into two batches — those

obtained by subjects who had begun learning Spanish before age 12 and those obtained by subjects who had begun learning the language beyond age 12 at secondary level. Age 12 was chosen as the dividing line because it tends to coincide with the onset of puberty, which has traditionally been taken as the end point of the critical period for language learning, and because certain researchers (e.g., Long 1990) specifically refer to it as crucial in this connection. Second, we compared the results of the entire subsample of students who had learned Spanish previously with those of the group of subjects who had started Spanish *ab initio* at university, that is to say after age 17.

A comparison of the results of the under-12 beginners with those of those of subjects who had started Spanish during their second-level schooling revealed no significant difference. This is in line with the above-discussed results of earlier studies. A comparison of the *ab initio* results with those of subjects who had taken Spanish at school, on the other hand, did throw up a statistically significant advantage for the latter group ($t = 3.37$ with 19 df). This cannot, however, be interpreted as straightforward evidence of an age factor, since the age variable in these data is confounded with the length of exposure variable, the *ab initio* group having had, by definition, years' less experience of Spanish than the more advanced group.

A second "success factor" much debated in the L2 learning literature is that of input (see, e.g., Krashen 1985; Richards 1985; Long 1992). Much has been made in the literature of the importance of quality as well as quantity of input, and current research on this topic is tending to focus on very specific attributes of L2 input that may lead to greater long-term proficiency. The following elements of previous experience of Spanish were mentioned only by subjects from our subsample of non-*ab-initio* learners who had obtained marks in the highest grade achieved by the group: correspondence in Spanish, experience of a Spanish-speaking milieu, and use of Spanish with one's family. The numbers involved here are very small, but this finding does in a very limited way corroborate the findings of other researchers who have demonstrated the beneficial effects of meaningful interaction in the target language beyond the confines of the classroom (see, e.g., Harris 1984).

A third factor often discussed in connection with L2 learning success is attitude and motivation (see, e.g., Gardner & Lambert 1972; Gardner 1985; Skehan 1989; Crookes & Schmidt 1991). Despite the spilling of much ink on the matter, it remains unclear, however,

precisely what the crucial components of attitude and motivation are in relation to L2 learning success and indeed whether success is the effect or the cause (or both) of particular kinds of attitude and motivation. We tried to explore the attitude/motivation-success question in the context of the present data by examining whether there was any relationship between subjects' success level in the Spanish language examination and the reasons that had been given for embarking on a university Spanish course or attitudes implied by their account of the experience of learning and using the language.

As far as reasons given for taking Spanish at university are concerned, the same general pattern (see above) is to be found amongst students achieving low grades as amongst students achieving high grades. There is, however, one kind of report given under this heading that is uniquely associated with failure, namely the indication that Spanish was taken as a result of inability to gain a place on a preferred degree course. This, though, offers no more than confirmation of the common-sense intuition that if a person does not really want to do something, his/her chances of doing it well are limited.

With regard to the approving and disapproving comments on elements of the learning experience made by the 10 subjects who had taken Spanish at school, again, broadly speaking, the same arrays of positive and negative comments crop up across the grade divisions. The one strong indication of attitudes which clearly corresponds with the level of university examination results attained relates to the amount of grammar teaching subjects received. All 4 subjects who expressed a view about the helpfulness or otherwise of having been exposed to only a limited amount of grammar teaching at school obtained examination marks in the top grade achieved by the group. Interestingly, whereas 3 of the 4 regarded it as unhelpful to have been taught only a limited amount of grammar, the fourth took the view that the lack of grammatical instruction had been helpful. It might perhaps be more fruitful to explore the implications of this particular finding further in a language awareness perspective rather than an attitudinal/motivational perspective (cf. Little & Ridley 1992).

Concerning the impressions of native speakers of Spanish reported by the 10 subjects who had learned Spanish at school, it is noticeable that 3 of the 5 from this subsample who obtained the highest grade achieved by the group reported "very favourable" impressions of Spanish native speakers, whilst none of the 3 whose marks fell into the lowest grade achieved by the group reported "very favourable"

impressions. This looks like evidence (admittedly, very tenuous) of some kind of connection between the view taken of the target language community and success in learning the target language in question.

To summarize, our findings on the way in which age and input relate to L2 learning success are broadly in line with those of other studies. With regard to attitude/motivation, we find that lack of specific interest in Spanish is associated with failure, that a *pro* or *anti* attitude vis-à-vis the amount of grammatical instruction on offer is associated with success, and that very favourable impressions of native speakers also tend to be associated with success. Of these latter three findings only the second is a little surprising and perhaps merits further examination in a language awareness perspective.

6 Conclusion

This profile of a group of university-level students of Spanish in Ireland has probably done little more than corroborate what would have been intuited by most informed observers of the third-level foreign language scene in Ireland. Such empirical corroboration of intuitions is not without importance, however, and it is hoped that Level 1 of the TCD Modern Languages Project will continue to fulfil a useful function in this regard. In the process, it will no doubt also from time to time offer sidelights on details and effects of learners' perceptions and experience (such as those discussed above relative to grammatical instruction), and will thus supply evidence which can usefully be brought to bear on issues of a more theoretical kind.

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